As you know, last week and this week we are focusing on the book of 1 Timothy, in line with the readings from the IBRA study notes which we at the Tab are using this year. Having realised that Simon was to preach on chapter two, with its references to women learning in quietness, with full submission, and without wearing gold or pearls, I was a bit worried about following him this week! Fortunately, encouraged by his positive words about women in the church, I feel that I do at least have a platform to speak, and without the need to remove my gold and pearl earrings, but after his amazing sermon last week I was left with the question, how do I follow that? Bear with me, I’ll give it a try!

Our first reading today starts with the assertion that ‘in later times’ some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Recalling a section from last week, it repeats the reference to hypocritical liars and suggests that ‘a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on truths of faith and of the good teaching that you have followed’ will be able to discern the difference between what is godly and what are ‘the godless myths and old wives tales’. How easy that sounds, but how difficult and yet how important it is for any church community.

Last week Simon referenced the new phrase ‘post-truth’ that seems to be the buzzword in politics of the moment, and spoke of trying to discern the truth from the lies. Just now we have plenty of politicians who try to justify their arguments from a biblical or Christian standpoint. It’s nothing new, Hitler’s death camps and South Africa’s Apartheid Laws were justified with just such lies. Some of their arguments were drawn from Old Testament ‘chosen people’ theology, but they chime with the idea that Christians should keep themselves separate and pure, distancing themselves from the deceiving spirits and hypocritical liars in alien groups; rejecting their godless myths and old wives tales. Some of these arguments are being used about refugees and immigrants today. Although this attitude can sit rather awkwardly with the ‘love your neighbour’ principles in the Gospels, being wary of assimilation with worldly values and pagan teaching has always been a central Christian preoccupation.

So how do we know the truth? What is the writer of 1 Timothy trying to say here? He references hypocritical liars who forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving. This seems to be the very opposite of a warning against worldly values. It’s a warning against those who preach celibacy and abstinence! A little story by Tom Wright helps us to understand how to read this:

Jane grew up in a family that loved to play old fashioned card games. They liked the feel of the cards, the anticipation and excitement of the shuffle, the deal and the sorting of a hand. They got to know the different faces of the cards. In later years they looked back and valued these experiences – how playing cards had exercised their memories, taught them to think strategically and given them lessons in how to play the hand they’d been dealt to their best advantage and not grumble because someone else had a better one.

When Jane met James she realised for the first time that not everybody saw playing cards in that way. James’ grandfather had lost his job and one night went to drown his sorrows in a bar where people were gambling for money. What began as a last desperate measure to bring money home for his family quickly became an obsession. Drawn by the lure of the game, his folly brought shame, ridicule and ruin on the family. Now of course, it’s possible to gamble without it becoming an obsession, but for the people in James’ family the very appearance of a pack of playing cards was tainted. Cards were evil and to be avoided.

It’s a simple story, but it helps to illustrate the very valid reasons why some people have extreme reactions to things like sex or food or alcohol. Some people, because of the past experiences of themselves, their families or their friends, acquire a set of pre-judgements against certain habits or behaviours that they perceive to have caused damage. I use the phrase pre-judgement very carefully here. It’s the root behind the word prejudice, which is a word that none of us like to have applied to us. Yet all of us carry a whole heap of pre-judgements and preferences which are fed by our past experiences and those of people close to us. They don’t all have to be as dark and sinister as gambling addictions… they can be as simple as a passionate love of gardening, a preference for BBC over ITV, a wariness near the edge of cliffs. The problems start when these pre-judgements slip, almost imperceptibly, into prejudices, when they cross that invisible line from a reasonable preference or dislike into a judgement and rejection of the people who don’t share them; when we use them to try to influence other people’s behaviours and lifestyles.

My mother is, to this day, quite fearful of water. She never learned to swim and had a bad experience in some open water as a child. As a result, she tried to stop me learning to swim. Personally, I don’t think that was terribly wise. Fortunately I often made a point of doing exactly the opposite of what she wanted and I’m now a very safe and competent swimmer. In our theoretical story, if James were to use his fear of cards to prevent Jane from enjoying them and go on to tell her that she and all her family were evil and ungodly because of their card playing indulgences, then that would be unreasonable.

The advice to Timothy in this chapter is to be wary of people who dress up prohibition and put words into God’s mouth that were never there. He is advised to go back to Biblical truth from Genesis and remember that everything God created is good, that nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer. Obviously there still needs to be discernment, and that’s why in verses 7 to 10 Timothy is told to train himself to be godly, to labour and strive to put his hope in the living God, but he’s then advised, in chapter 5 verse 23, to stop drinking water, and use a little wine! We all have a duty to be careful about what we declare to be godly or ungodly, to work at our discernment, to read and discuss and pray together in order to avoid allowing our pre-judgements, our cultural baggage, to cloud our interpretation.

Although we skipped over them in our readings today, the detailed references to widows in 1 Timothy chapter five are worthy of attention. Timothy is being given basic practical advice here about how to manage his Church.

The advice - to be honest – is a bit bizarre. Phrases like ‘The widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives’ and ‘their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ’ seem to suggest that all widows are likely to live debauched lives and should actually be locked up in a convent. Taken out of context like this it could all be seen (and perhaps has been, by people with a certain amount of cultural baggage about women needing to be subservient) as an instruction about keeping widowed women in their place once their husbands were no longer there to do that for them. Read carefully, it becomes clear that this too is simply practical advice about the church supporting people who are genuinely needy without encouraging idlers and hangers on. Widows at that time often faced total destitution unless they were supported by their children. Tom Wright suggests that apparently some widows’ children soon got wise to the altruistic nature of the new Christian communities and persuaded their widowed mothers to become Christians so that they would be looked after by the church – and the kids could abdicate all responsibility for them! In the same way that people occasionally abuse our welfare state, or our immigration laws, these widows and their families tried to abuse the goodwill of the Church. Going back to my earlier point about immigration, we should notice that Timothy is exhorted to ‘Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.’ These same principles should perhaps apply to our response to those who apply to us for help, including immigrants and refugees, and once again the process of discernment about who to support and who not to support needs to be sensitive and appropriate.

In chapter six, Timothy is given some other advice about making sure that the slaves in his church community are appropriately respectful to their masters, so as not to bring the church into disrepute. The chapter also contains that infamous verse, ‘For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.’ The first of these verses have been used historically to argue that slavery is divinely sanctioned, the latter to argue that money is evil and Christians should have nothing to do with it.

Of course the argument supporting slavery was used by people whose wealth depended on the slave trade, and the arguments that Christians should embrace poverty were also put about by rich, powerful and corrupt church leaders who wanted to keep their pew-fodder happy in their poverty while they raked in all the cash. Tucked neatly in between these two sections is the warning about the ‘unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between people.’ In the context of the earlier advice, I would prefer to interpret this as a warning about the trickiness of words, a reminder to pray and consult and seek guidance from the Holy Spirit about their interpretation, but even this expression can be used by the rich and powerful as a means of sustaining the status quo and keeping the power in their hands. Think about it:

Don’t argue about the words in the Bible – believe unquestioningly what they tell you (or what I tell you that they tell you!). They are the words of God… Isn’t that a dangerous way to interpret this phrase?

As referenced earlier, we must be very wary of the ‘post-truth’, of people trying to gain ownership of absolute truth. The new expression ‘post-truth’ has echoes of George Orwell’s expressions ‘Newspeak’ and ‘Doublethink’ from the famous novel ‘1984’ about a totalitarian state. Regardless of the questions about who actually wrote the words in the Bible, or how they were divinely inspired, we can see that the problem of us discerning the truth from words has been with us since the earliest times.

The questions about whether and when to take the bible literally just won’t go away. One solution is to see scripture as a ‘sacrament of divine revelation…’ a kind of journey through ‘God’s historical self-disclosure’ the interpretation of which shifts and changes as the people of God grow closer to understanding through our interaction with the Holy Spirit. As I was struggling with how to articulate this problem last week, Rev Dr Sam Wells from St Martin in the Fields - a speaker on Radio 4’s ‘Thought for the Day’ - stepped in conveniently and put the words in my mouth:

*You could call some Christians originalists, because they speak about the Bible as the unchangeable and definitive account of how God intends things to be – the tangible record of who Jesus is. Other Christians believe the Holy Spirit leads the church into deeper understandings that ring true with the Bible’s original content, but don’t unquestioningly replicate it. These are the two kinds of authority: that grounded in history and tradition; and that based on contemporary relevance and applicability. This battle over authority is perhaps the greatest ideological contest of our day.*

Sam Wells’ conclusion was that we need both of these approaches to interpret Biblical truth. Now I don’t know how many of us at the Tab ascribe a view that we should be trying to get back to the original divine truth, and how many think we should be looking forwards and constantly re-interpreting truth with the help of the Holy Spirit. I do know that we have a range of people here, some of whom take scripture more literally than others. In the true nature of the Reformed Tradition, we’re a fairly liberal church, but by definition that makes us a broad church that has to learn to agree to disagree with each other’s interpretations. As Sam Wells suggests, we need to hold both these things in tension and every now and again that becomes difficult.

The fact is that the way we choose to read and interpret the Bible and use it to shape our lives, and our churches, has massive implications for the people in our church communities… and for those outside them. Simon referenced last week the story of Revd Dr Nick Bundock who acknowledged that by trying to preserve the peace, and avoiding the controversy about interpretation of biblical truths concerning homosexuality, he had unwittingly created a church that was exclusive and unsafe for people who were gay. One of his congregation committed suicide as a result. I thank God that Simon has been courageous enough to make sure that our church does engage with such controversies. Painful as the dialogue might be, it’s nothing to the pain that Nick Bundock’s church has experienced. Like many of you here I have close friends and family members who are gay, some of whom are trying to work out how to be a Christian in that context. I also have close friends and family members who believe that being gay is a perversion of God’s intention for humanity and that homosexual acts are sinful. Somehow, we need to find ways for us all to sit down together and ask the Holy Spirit to guide us forwards.

This whole topic has exercised me greatly and to close with this morning, I want to share with you a personal story that has recently given me great hope, and a great sense of peace regarding our forthcoming same sex marriage consultation. A couple of weeks ago, a group of the elders met at my house to watch a DVD together which explores the topic of homosexuality and the biblical teaching on this subject. Knowing that there are greatly differing views about this on the eldership I approached the evening with some trepidation and a lot of prayer. I think (I hope!) that if you were to speak to any of the elders who attended that evening, they would all say that we managed to speak honestly and openly and with love, that we learned more about each other’s positions and about what the bible had to say. After the meeting, my evening prayers were tearful and heartfelt. I was grateful that it had been so positive, but greatly exercised by the differences of opinion. I prayed, more earnestly than I have for some time, for God’s hand to be on our forthcoming discussions, for his discernment to become evident, for guidance about what His will is for The Tab. I then fell asleep. I woke, bolt upright at 5.38am with a picture in my head. I see pictures like this very rarely. They come completely unbidden and are not related to any dream. They flash into my mind and disappear in a split second and leave me grasping to bring them back and look at them again. They are always accompanied by words. On this occasion the picture was of a pink pre-dawn sky – no sunlight, no rain and yet a beautiful rainbow arced across the scene. Bizarrely, in the foreground, was some kind of lamp-post with a blazing white light shining out. The words in my head were ‘promise’ and ‘hope’. I felt an enormous sense of peace and such a strong sense of the importance of this picture that I noted the time, got up, went into the study and found pencil and paper and wrote down the words ‘rainbow, promise, hope’. As I got back into bed, my phone pinged, bizarrely at that time in the morning, with a text message. It was from one of the elders who had been unable to attend the meeting the night before, telling me that our discussion was held in prayer. It made me cry because suddenly I felt that God was very close. I don’t know what the outcome of our discussions on this topic will be, but I now have a strong sense that God’s hand is upon us, that his truth is able to embrace our different views and that - whatever the outcome of our consultation – He promises protection and peace and hope for those on both sides of this debate if we trust in him.

Going back to the beginning of our readings today, with reference to the hypocritical liars who ‘forbid marriage’, Timothy was asked to remember that our model is Jesus Christ our Lord and that his example was one of love, that everything God created is good, that we must put our hope in the living God and we must pray and study to discern His truth. I pray that we at Dursley Tabernacle will always be able to do that together, in love. Amen.

**Acknowledgements:**

Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Liturgical Press, 1999).

Revd Dr Sam Wells, BBC Thought For The Day on Feb 2nd 2017. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04rmvtx>

Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone, The Pastoral Letters* (SPCK, 2004).